

Diversity Statement

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I will describe some of the experiences that have shaped my views on institutional diversity and my role promoting it, concrete actions I have taken, and how I would view my responsibilities as academic faculty. As someone with considerable social privilege (I'm a white, cis-gendered man), my responsibility is first to listen, actively and with humility, and then to take action, both through my personal relationships as a teacher or mentor, and in official projects such as departmental panels, diversity events, or outreach, ideally as a subordinate to a representative of a targeted under-represented group.

1 Expressed, Felt Need

Padre Greg of the San Lucas Tolimán mission in Guatemala taught me a wonderful phrase which, to me, encapsulates the importance of listening. Padre Greg described to us volunteers his story arriving in Guatemala as a young priest with all sorts of plans to improve the lives of his parishioners, only to learn the difficult lesson that his ideas were not always the best. Over the years, he acquired the wisdom to act only in response to “expressed, felt need.” that is, need which is spoken openly, not guessed at, and which is sincerely felt, not based on the expectations of the powerful.

One aspect of privilege is having one's opinion taken seriously by default. Consequently, even well-intentioned privileged people can do harm by aggressively promoting *their* solutions, rather than listening with humility to the needs and experience of under-privileged. Coming into contact with expressed, felt need requires real effort. As a Peace Corps volunteer in Kazakhstan, I witnessed myriad extreme versions of failure to listen. For example, an NGO provided the elementary school I worked in with an expensive computer lab. When the NGO representative visited (once, for a single day), the lab was unlocked, and a show lesson was put on for their benefit. Otherwise, the computers sat entirely unused for many reasons, including for fear of their being broken, for lack of teachers to teach computer skills, and for lack of time in the government-mandated curriculum.

Less extreme disconnects between the privileged and under-privileged all the time, and the privileged must make conscious effort to check their ego, to listen, and to learn. As an example of listening that I consider successful, I was asked by the Statistics Department at UC Berkeley to serve on a student panel on increasing diversity and representation in the department. Those of us on the panel had clear ideas of what would help, but, by their nature, such panels usually consist of graduate students who are already succeeding. Recognizing this bias in ourselves, we took it upon ourselves to conduct open-ended interviews with all the grad students in the department to ask what would improve the UC Berkeley grad school experience, especially for under-represented minorities and women. The results were eye-opening. None of the panel's original ideas (such as a student paper seminar) were very popular, but there was broad and vocal support for other reforms (such as clearer requirements for the qualifying exam), and . The work to collate responses not only exposed weakness in our own assumptions, it also signaled to the department that we were serious enough about diversity to do a considerable amount of work, and provided numerical support to bolster our recommendations.

2 Taking Action

University faculty can take action to promote equity and justice in at least two qualitatively distinct ways. One is through official programs, such as departmental outreach or diversity events. The other is through personal relationships, such as via mentorship, advising, and teaching.

Official programs to promote diversity, such as department panels, outreach programs, and diversity events are best led by the group whom they are intended to serve. However, the

privileged can often play a useful subordinate role. In response to the Geroge Marcy sexual harassment scandal at UC Berkeley, two female PhD students in statistics wanted to organize a department-wide “diversity lunch” to discuss issues related to sexism in the statistics field, and they asked me to help. Importantly, the impetus and key decisions were entirely theirs. I could of course provide material help (emailing, gathering resources, presenting, etc.). But my active presence served an additional purpose: to signal that sexism was not simply a “women’s issue,” but a problem that affects and should engage everyone.

It is my belief that personal relationships are the best opportunity for real social change, and university faculty have the opportunity to forge many meaningful relationships with students. Everything begins with listening, and professors can often provide a lot of help simply by acting as empathetic sounding boards for struggling students. The principal factor that is negatively associated with URM dropout is a community, and professors can help ensure that students, especially under-represented students, feel they have somewhere helpful to turn when they struggle. (One of the initiatives that came out of the aforementioned UC Berkeley diversity panel was a strengthened student mentorship program, which I actively participated in as a mentor.) Good pedagogy benefits everyone, but can particularly under-represented groups. As I discuss in my teaching statement, I make sure that expectations are as unambiguous as possible, that the students receive frequent feedback, and employ different modes of evaluation (papers, tests, in-class presentation, and so on). And, of course, teachers who carefully monitor their students progress have the opportunity to intervene proactively if they notice under-represented students struggling.